



Home Stays

How Homestays In Zanskar Are Bridging Culture And Conservation

Embark on a culinary and cultural journey through Ladakh's villages, experiencing traditional homestays that bridge conservation efforts with authentic hospitality



Beautiful landscape of a traditional Ladakhi house in the mountains of Zanskar Shutterstock

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"Would you like traditional **Ladakhi food** or *dal-paneer* dishes?" I had just settled into a homestay in Zangla village of **Zanskar**, in **Ladakh**, and my host was enquiring. There was no hesitation there; my immediate response was, "Ladakhi, preferably one of the lighter dishes." With a smile, Tsering Dolma, the lady of the house, suggested a hot *thukpa* (soup with vegetables, wheat dumplings, and yak cheese), and I nodded enthusiastically, gratefully accepting a blanket to snuggle into while awaiting dinner.

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Host family at Tsering Dolma Homestay Ashish Kothari

I had just arrived at Zangla after a full day's cab drive from Leh with some colleagues of the Snow Leopard Conservancy – India Trust (SLC-IT), whose work I was providing some inputs to, and a Kalpavriksh colleague. The ride was incredible in the sheer diversity and beauty of the landscapes we passed through, including the high passes of Sirsir-la and Singge-la, but also tiring and, at stretches, a bit unnerving when the path was a narrow single lane one with a sharp drop into the [Zanskar](#) river on one side. So, while memories of the scenery were still alive in my mind, I was also glad to be relaxing in one of Ladakh's famed homestays.

Over a delicious bowl of *thukpa*, I enquired about the family we were staying with. Tsering Dolma (after whom the homestay was named, as I noticed on a coffee mug designed by one of her sons) managed the place with her husband, Rigzin Dorjay. One of their two sons was training to be an ophthalmologist, while their daughter Padma Dolma served at a government hospital near Pangong Lake. The family cultivated some land and had a diverse and productive home garden plot, too—Dorjay proudly showed me some apples he claimed were the first to be grown in Zanskar. I did not have the heart to tell him that this may be a sign of global warming, and we meandered over other aspects of their life.



Room at Tsering Dolma Homestay Ashish Kothari

A Unique Initiative

Started in 2012, the Tsering Dolma Homestay is one of five in Zangla village that SLC-IT helped establish. This is part of a long-standing "Himalayan Homestay" programme, begun in the early 2000s as perhaps the first-ever homestay initiative in the Himalayas. Tsewang Namgyal, Director of SLC-IT and my co-traveller on this trip told me that the programme was started to link conservation of snow leopards (and their habitat and associated wildlife) with enhanced livelihood options for villagers. It was especially oriented at reducing the conflict between the leopard and people, which was at times intense due to the wild cat's predation of sheep and goats.

The idea came from a woman in one of the villages where they were discussing their conservation objectives; she pointed out that tourists came for trekking and wildlife watching, but the local residents got nothing out of this, all the proceeds going to outside tour operators. Why, she said, could they not encourage tourists to stay in our homes, where they can experience how we live, and we can get some revenue? Rinchen Wangchuk, then Director of SLC-IT (who tragically passed away a decade later), immediately latched onto the idea of beginning the program.

Over the two decades that SLC-IT has been running this programme, about 200 households in 40 villages have been aided in setting up homestays. SLC-IT leaves it to communities to decide which households will participate but specifies some criteria, such as economic or social vulnerability, a passion or interest in hosting people, and the availability of an extra room or two and a dry composting toilet with doors (the

traditional ones sometimes lack doors). Once the village selects households, SLC-IT provides basic training in visitor hospitality, what kinds of experiences the visitors may like, book-keeping, hygiene, etc., and some basic materials like blankets, sheets, buckets, towels, awareness material, registers and feedback forms. It also enables exposure visits to places where successful homestays are already running and helps establish a "conservation fund" for the village, with each participating household contributing 10 per cent of tourism receipts.

Vocal For Local



Zanskar river valley Ashish Kothari

"How many tourists do you receive?" I asked my hosts in Zangla. Dorjay responded: "An average of 25-30 guests a year, mostly foreigners, American, French, and others. We advise them on things to do here and help in activities like cycling, trekking, visits to the nearby *gompas* (monasteries), or a bath in the hot springs."

I asked what food they generally serve and was told that while foreigners generally prefer whatever we eat, Indians are fussier and often don't want traditional Ladakhi dishes. Sadly, I reflected that this is congruent with the general narrative of people across **Ladakh**, that foreigners are more mindful of local cultural and ecological sensitivities than Indians, who tend to be more demanding and less willing to explore local cuisines and cultures (other than visits to monasteries).

This reflection increased as I went to the homestay toilet, an outhouse with the traditional Ladakhi dry facility. Most visitors, especially domestic ones, demand flush toilets, which has significantly increased the use of scarce water and polluted waterways, leading to an increased incidence of waterborne diseases. As I did my job using the dry toilet, I read a notice on the door explaining that these facilities save water and the organic manure used in fertilising fields.

Back inside the house, my hosts showed me the room I would spend the night in. It was their drawing room, doubling as the guest bedroom. Other homestays I have been to have often had a separate room dedicated to visitors, but this dual-use arrangement is also common.

Two *rajais* were piled up on the bed, and Dorjay asked me if that would be enough; I said I thought so, but since I sounded a bit uncertain, he went and brought another one, "just in case." I'd also brought a hot water bottle for the bed and requested it is filled; they'd already placed a flask of *chuskol* (hot drinking water, sipping of which through the day is essential in [Ladakh](#)) next to the bed.



The imposing Zangla Khar Palace Ashish Kothari

The next morning, refreshed from a great night's sleep, I reluctantly crept out from under the *rajais*. Our hosts had offered to walk my colleague Shrishtee and me up to the Zangla Khar Palace, a 10th-century structure from where the local king Wesley Phuntsok Spaldey ruled till 1834. In disuse and ruins due to many years of neglect, it had been recently renovated with the help of Hungarian volunteers and funds in honour of Sándor Csoma de Kőrös, a 19th-century scholar who stayed here putting together the first Tibetan-English dictionary.



Zanskar river valley, view from Zangla Khar Palace Ashish Kothari

The view of the Zanskar Valley, Zangla and other villages on two sides of the river snaking into the distant mountains was breathtaking. Walking slowly back to the homestay, we saw a herd of Bharal (Blue sheep) not far up a hill and a Bearded vulture soaring lazily above the ridgeline. We also passed a couple of other homestays, and I later asked Namgail how the village decides where to put up a visitor.

He said that they have encouraged a rotational system wherever they have helped set up homestays. Hence, no household gets an undue advantage simply because they may have a more attractive location or slightly better facilities. He said this works well in places with greater community cohesion and understanding but not so perfectly in others. He also admitted that not all homestay owners maintain facilities so well; I observed that, at times, toilets are a bit smellier than needed, and not everyone has the posters on the Himalayan Homestay programme prominently displayed. But, as I told him, these are minor quibbles in a heartwarming experience.

SLC has also introduced other activities like felt toy-making to spread the benefits of visitation to households that may not be able to set up a homestay. Introduced by a visiting German artist and educator named UteMeuser and learned by some of SLC's staff and others, this skill is being imparted to women in several villages. While we were there, a 2-day training occurred at another SLC-supported homestay, Khar or Stanzin Dolma's, where Shrishtee was put up. These soft toys, with figures of snow leopards, ibex, and other animals, are a good source of income for many women.

Adventures In Karsha



Chokpo Pa homestay Ashish Kothari

After a couple of days in Zangla, I shifted to Karsha. A couple hundred metres above the road was the Chokpo Pa homestay run by Stanzin Zomba and Thugjay Targais, a tour operator. The house was situated below the imposing Karsha Monastery, Zanskar's biggest, and had a lovely view of the valley below. A short walk away was one of the area's biggest Buddha statues, and a breathtaking walk up took one to the multiple levels of the monastery.



Hosts and guests at Chokpo Pa Homestay Ashish Kothari

This homestay was started ten years back with SLC's help, and like the one in Zangla, it receives about 25-30 visitors a year. "Many people come for a day to see the monastery", said 'Uncle' Targais (or, as he said, just 'Uncle' since everyone in Zanskar knows him as that!), "but then they stay on 3-4 days as they like Karsha and our homestay so much!"

Here, too, I had a choice of traditional local food or the standard *chawal-daal* and *matar-paneer*. Butter or salt tea, "Indian chai," or just loads of chuskol were available whenever one wanted. This one had set up a flush toilet inside the house but retained the dry toilet outside, too, which seems to be a good compromise to cater to the different comfort levels of visitors.



Host family at Palmo Homestay, Padum Ashish Kothari

As I've found in most of my Zaskar homestays, hosts are always willing to chat about anything to do with Ladakh's culture, politics, environment, and other topics, and they are also curious about the places we come from. I recall with fondness my stay at the Palmo homestay in Padum town when I visited Zaskar in 2021; here, a lively family of wife-husband, three daughters, a son, a dog and a cat provided one of the warmest and most laughter-filled stays I have ever had. This time, I dropped in to say hello to them and got scolded for staying elsewhere! The daughters were away for studies and work, and the son was busy setting up a café.

I truly felt the essence of homestays during my time in Ladakh. It's all about immersing in the local culture, savouring authentic food, and appreciating the environment. For visitors, it's a chance to connect deeply. Meanwhile, hosts earn a living showcasing Ladakhi hospitality, and there's a beautiful link between these livelihoods and wildlife conservation. This spirit made my experiences truly special.

Crisis Of Authenticity

Unfortunately, the success of this form of tourism has generated a range of copycat facilities where almost anything goes in the name of "homestays." According to many sensitive observers of the rapid growth of tourism in Ladakh, there is little of the original spirit and ethic in government-supported or privately run "homestays" that are mushrooming across the region. Many are not even facilities in people's homes but more like lodges or hotels. Not many are connected to ecological conservation, and

cultural sensitivity is often bypassed.

As a phenomenon, though, they may still be better than the very urban, western-style tourism facilities sprouting up since tourism boomed in Ladakh (especially after the film "3 Idiots" in which Aamir Khan's character stands in shown at some of the region's idyllic spots). But that is the subject of another article; for the moment, I wanted to give you a feel of how Zaskar's homestays can be a home away from home and more.

The Information

Homestays supported by SLC-IT are available in several parts of Zaskar, especially along trekking trails (and the rest of Ladakh, mostly in the Leh district). More informatio can be obtained by visiting their websites: snowleopardindia.org and Himalayan-homestays.com (soon to be relaunched). Homestays can be booked by sending an email to slcladakh@gmail.com.

Getting There

Reaching Zaskar involves a multi-modal journey due to its challenging terrain. While Zaskar lacks direct air or rail connectivity, the nearest airport is Kushok Bakula Rimpochee Airport in Leh. From Leh, a picturesque road journey of approximately 14 hours via NH1 and Zaskar Valley Road leads to Zaskar. Alternatively, travellers can take a train to Jammu Tawi Railway Station and then embark on a 2-day road trip to Zaskar. Check [here](#) for permit-related enquiries.

Ladakh India Zaskar



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